

Statement for the Record
Senator Jon Kyl, June 8, 2004

America mourns the loss of an epoch-making leader, Ronald Wilson Reagan.

As the biographer Lou Cannon has said, Reagan “possessed a special ‘something’ that transcended the appeal of ordinary politicians” and he knew it. Even so – and this is an important point – he was neither a vain man nor in love with power. In not misusing the special appeal that he had, he showed such character and goodness. He could have been, but was not, a demagogue. He was trying to accomplish his exalted vision of this country, only that.

In large measure, he succeeded.

Militarily, he rebuilt America’s capability to defend itself and its allies. Reagan’s defense buildup led to U.S. victories in the Cold War, the Persian Gulf War, and beyond. Dealing skillfully with a Congress controlled during most of his presidency by the other party, he secured funding for weapons systems that are still being used.

Diplomatically, he achieved with the Soviet Union, our adversary during most of the last century, an accord that eliminated whole classes of nuclear weapons from the stockpiles of both countries.

Politically, he made us regain our confidence in America. His confidence in his country and its goodness was utterly unshakable, so he was just the right leader to rise to the fore when the national spirit had been battered by the withdrawal from in Vietnam, the scandal of Watergate, and the “malaise” that his predecessor identified but could not seem to counteract.

Economically, he slew the dragon of double digit inflation. He braved unpopularity to stay the course with Paul Volcker, chairman of the Federal Reserve, in tightening the money supply. This steadfastness saw the United States through its worst economic crisis in 50 years. The economy slid deep into recession before recovering in late 1982. Along with tightening the money supply to kill inflation, Reagan was convinced that marginal tax rates must be cut to stimulate growth. These anti-inflation and tax policies defied the conventional wisdom of that time. But they worked. They gave us what the late, great journalist

Robert Bartley called “the seven fat years,” a time of unprecedented job creation and economic expansion in America.

Even as Ronald Reagan won through in domestic policy, he was a statesman who left his mark on the world. During his two terms in office, early 1981 to the end of 1988, he championed the cause of human rights in the Soviet Union and Central and Eastern Europe, standing up for freedom, democracy, and civil society. He spoke passionately of God-given rights, and said that self-government and free markets were the way to vindicate those rights. He wanted the people who were living under oppression to regain their dignity. And his words gave hope to millions. In his 1982 “Evil Empire” speech before the British House of Commons, President Reagan said:

“While we must be cautious about forcing the pace of change, we must not hesitate to declare our ultimate objectives and to take concrete actions to move toward them. We must be staunch in our conviction that freedom is not the sole prerogative of a lucky few but the inalienable and universal right of all human beings.”

The Reagan administration fostered democracy around the world in the 1980s, in Central America, South America, and Asia. The Philippines, Taiwan, and South Korea all liberalized their societies in ways that may not have been possible without the Reagan administration’s support.

Reagan will go down in history for his doctrine of “peace through strength.” It turned this country around militarily and diplomatically, and turned the course of the Cold War dramatically our favor. It was also a negotiating strategy – the right one, it turned out, for dealing with a communist power that was ailing economically but still aggressive. The Soviet Union had last invaded a country the year before he was elected, Afghanistan in 1979. The USSR was engaged in the 1970s in a rapid military build-up.

And the prevailing nuclear standoff between the two superpowers when Reagan came into office was frightening. They were locked in a decades-old equilibrium under which neither attacked the other because each could, at the push of a button, destroy the other’s population with nuclear weapons. President Reagan once said this nuclear standoff, which was called Mutual Assured Destruction, was “a sad commentary on the human condition.”

He had the courage and the imagination to think of a way out of it: erecting a defense against nuclear arms. This would end the practice of holding civilian populations hostage to the atom bomb. It was, he believed, both militarily and morally necessary to strike off in this new direction. As he pointed the way, he endured heavy criticism and even ridicule, but it didn't faze him. His idea was brilliant: for even if embarking on this high-tech shield against missiles did not lead to a deployable U.S. system right away, he knew the Soviets would pour their resources into matching our progress toward missile defense. It was a competition they could ill afford. The extra burden – economically, and even psychologically, of keeping up with missile defense and the entire Reagan military build-up – hastened the collapse of the Soviet economy and the communist system itself.

People who didn't agree with President Reagan called him a saber rattler, and worse. Opponents wrung their hands at his "peace through strength" approach, insisting that a build-up of U.S. military capabilities couldn't possibly help us if the goal was a safer and more peaceful world. Yet the critics were wrong. President Reagan, the "saber rattler," sat down with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in Washington in December of 1987, and the two men signed the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty, which abolished the use of all intermediate and shorter range missiles by the United States and the Soviet Union.

The following year, the Reagan administration created the On-Site Inspection Agency to conduct U.S. inspections of Soviet military facilities and to aid Soviet inspection teams at our facilities. The Reagan-Gorbachev diplomacy set the stage for the 1990 signing between NATO and the Warsaw Pact of the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty.

One of the well-known personal traits of Ronald Reagan was that he didn't care who got the credit for successful policies. And goodness knows his detractors then, and now, will deny him any credit he might deserve for making the world safer. He did make the world safer, though. That is the truth of it. And history will remember him that way.

We can say of Ronald Reagan what Lincoln said in praise of his personal role model, Henry Clay: "He loved his country partly because it was his own country, but mostly because it was a free country." The role model of our time is Ronald Reagan. His principles are the principles we embrace. They will help us to keep this a free country, and to help others who want to be free.

As we continue in the wake of September 11 to fight the war on terror, we all take comfort and inspiration from the jaunty optimism and the seriousness of purpose of Ronald Reagan. And President George W. Bush practices Reagan's doctrine of "peace through strength." He has done so by confronting and defeating tyranny in Afghanistan and Iraq; by pursuing the deployment of missile defenses; by leading the international community to stop the spread of weapons of mass destruction; and by demonstrating to the world that the United States is willing to rally free peoples in defense of our civilization and our democratic way of life.

Thank you, Ronald Reagan, for showing the way.